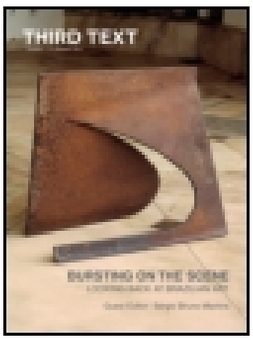

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Michael Jackson, Black Modernisms, and 'The Ecstasy of Communication'

Michele Wallace

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According to a recent quantifying study of MTV, videos featuring white males take up 83 percent of the 24-hour flow. Only 11 percent of MTV videos have central figures who are female (incidentally, the figure is even lower for blacks), and women are typically, like blacks, rarely important enough to be part of the foreground.

E. Ann Kaplan

We must therefore begin to think of cultural politics in terms of space and the struggle for space. Then we are no longer thinking in old categories of critical distance but in some new way where the disinherited and essentially modernist language of subversion and negation is conceived differently.

Fredric Jameson

Any evaluative interpretation of Michael Jackson's recent contribution to the music video scene must constantly struggle for space alongside considerations of consumerism and televisual postmodernism. But perhaps it is precisely these conditions that provide the ground for a different conception of "the disinherited and essentially modernist language of subversion and negation." Music videos are a prime example of how consumer society or late capitalism has co-opted the alternative and/or the oppositional in a once avant-garde rock

'n' rock/rhythm 'n' blues aesthetic. A hybrid of music performance documentaries and television ads, music videos not only sell us that which we expect to be free, namely our own private and unfulfillable desires, but they also make it increasingly impossible to distinguish between the genuine mass appeal of an artist and the music industry's simulation of that appeal.

Further, the encroaching 'postmodernism,' or nonsensical redundancy and fragmentation of the televisual medium, particularly in its music-video format, implies a lack of 'interpretative depth,' which Marxist critic Fredric Jameson describes as "the idea that the object [is] fascinating because of the density of its secrets and that these [are] then to be uncovered by interpretation. All that vanishes."[1] Here Jameson refers to a postmodern aesthetics marked by its rejection of historical sequence and individual subjectivity as supreme organizational principles. In other words, music videos are irreversibly implicated in what Jean Baudrillard would call "the ecstasy of communication," in which "all secrets, spaces and scenes" are "abolished in a single dimension of information."[2] So we might reasonably conclude that there's nothing to say.

Yet despite music-video consumerism and televisual postmodernism's powerful deterrents to interpretation — especially the kind of interpretation that bestows value — there are extenuating circumstances which indicate that Jackson's videos may be capable of playing a key role to evolving public discourses of race, sex, and class. First, Jackson is a black performer. Given his race, he has achieved an entirely unprecedented and gargantuan fame in a previously white supremacist music industry which routinely objectifies and colonizes the Third World and people of color. He may, in fact, be, as his own media hype never tires of suggesting, the new Elvis Presley or the new Beatles. Or perhaps he might have been — as Jesse Jackson might have been president — if not for racism.

In any case, not only does Michael Jackson's extraordinary fame and wealth mean that he may be able to supersede previous (dispersed and inarticulate) standards of industry control, Jackson's videos are also first rehearsed in a special format, independent of the unrelenting twenty-four-hour flow of videos, music news, and DJ chatter on VH1 and MTV. These peculiar shows constitute a curious new form of television program as unnameable as it is unspeakable. None of this means that Jackson escapes the corrupting influence of the commercial. Rather, I am suggesting that Jackson, both because of his race and his extraordinary success (even if it is equal parts hype and reality), has reached the stage at which we can usually expect an artist, consciously or unconsciously, to show signs of public resistance to his own formulaic social construction.

As for postmodernism, Jackson's status as a black male is even more important in understanding his case as an exception to the rule. I would like to suggest that the past for Afro-American culture, particularly that oral 'tradition' (which includes jokes, stories, toasts, black music from spirituals to funk, and black english[3]) pursued by the black masses, has been precisely a postmodern one inevitably inscribing (and inscribed by) our absence from history, the dead-end meaninglessness of the signifiers 'equality', 'freedom,' and 'justice,' and our chronic invisibility to the drama of Western civilization and European high culture. Therefore, it should come as no surprise when the telltale 'schizophrenia' and 'pastiche' of postmodernism are considered by some black artists to be characteristic of the enemy within, or racism internalized. In contrast, the most enlightened trends in contemporary Afro-

1 Anders Stephanson, "Regarding Postmodernism: A conversation with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text* (Fall 1987): 30.

2 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed, Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 126-134.

3 Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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American culture are in consistent pursuit of meaning, history, continuity, and the power of subjectivity. I am calling these various, heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting efforts, Black Modernisms, of which Jackson's recent performance is perhaps a new type.

There aren't too many people in the media who agree with me. In fact, it is precisely the breadth of the Michael Jackson controversy that has drawn me to this topic. Where does this controversy focus its attention? Is it on his videos, his music, his wealth, his fame, his sexuality, his race, his lifestyle, his aesthetics, his unwillingness to be interviewed, his family, his plastic surgery, his skin lightening and hair straightening, or is it some ineffable

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combination of any or all of the above? What, at this moment, at the peak of his career, is he being attacked and criticized on all sides? Why not attack Bob Dylan, who is also more wealthy than political; Prince, who also exhibits signs of ambiguous sexuality and white fever; Elizabeth Taylor or Lena Horne who also appear to have had plastic surgery? Is it because Jackson's album announces that he's "Bad"? Why was his sister, Janet Jackson, not attacked when she announced that she was in "Control" on her album, in the process utilizing many of her brother's stylistic trademarks? What is the criticism really about? Where does it come from? Could it have to do with Jackson's participation in what E. Ann Kaplan describes as a "second, softer androgynous group" of rock performers (that includes Annie Lennox, David Bowie, and Boy George), which is "not so concerned to stress the masculine that lies beneath the feminized veneer" and is "less obviously (and manipulatively) erotic"?[4] Could it be that we find it intolerable to hear a black male speak from this position, especially now that his recent videos substantiate that he thinks of himself as speaking for/to the black male?

4 E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), p. 102.

More than once in the supermarket check-out line, I've noticed covers of *The Star* and *The Enquirer* that exhibited an intense preoccupation with the question of whether or not Jackson has ever had sex with a 'girl.' These headlines offer one sign of how Jackson has lately been marked 'other' in the entertainment industry. Another kind of sign has been the way the *Village Voice* — or young hip left-liberal opinion, in general — has turned against him: "There's no longer any question that Michael Jackson is America's pre-eminent geek," Guy Trebay wrote recently. In the same issue of the *Voice*, black cultural critic Greg Tate described Jackson's plastic surgery as the "savaging of his African physiognomy" in an article entitled " 'I'm White!" What's Wrong With Michael Jackson."[5] But all this criticism seems to circle around the same problematic of racial and sexual difference, the inauthenticity and untrustworthiness that are implied when such issues are invoked by a black male (instead of, say, Diahann Carroll) because "Michael just looked too much like a woman to strut around like a homeboy in chains," as one of Trebay's respondents said of Jackson in the video *Bad*.

5 *Village Voice*, September 22, 1987, pp. 15-17.

Whereas, a recent *New York Times* article, written by Jon Pareles and entitled 'A Political Song That Casts its Vote for the Money,' attacks Jackson's work directly, apparently ignoring his persona. Pareles characterized Jackson's *Man in the Mirror* as "the most offensive music video clip ever" because "it's particular sales pitch is that buying the song equals concern over issues..." Part of Pareles's complaint is that the video wouldn't arouse would-be censors: "there's not a whiff of sex, no blood and little violence." And, "Mr Jackson doesn't show up either."[6] In a consummate gesture of objectivity, Pareles pretends to be colour blind, but in the process he only renders invisible (i.e., irrelevant) Jackson's race, the races of people who suffer "the homelessness and poverty" (that he says the video only "glances at"), and the video's unmistakeable preoccupation with racism and white-supremacist values. Perhaps this is why Pareles thinks the video, like the song, "points no fingers, reveals no underlying causes, assigns no blame, suggests no action." Perhaps this is also why Pareles didn't see Jackson in the video, for he is certainly there in one of the final frames, laughing, a small figure in red in a sea of Japanese children, who appear to be tickling him. Jackson, as was explained in *The making of Thriller* video, is very ticklish.

6 *New York Times*, March 6, 1988, p. 32.

The refrain of *Man in the Mirror* is "I'm starting wiith the man in the mirror. I'm asking him to make a change. No message could have been any clearer.

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If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change, change, change, change." Certainly not a revolutionary lyric (what is a revolutionary lyric?), but, significantly, it comes from an artist who has been transfixed by the hands-on mutability of his own face (as his extensive plastic surgery demonstrates) and his own image (as he demonstrated also in the video *Thriller*, in which he turns into a werewolf). We have in these lyrics, no doubt, an objectification of the self, in that he is addressing himself, along with other men, in the third person. But while we might reasonably expect the video to elaborate on this potentially narcissistic text, instead, for the first time, Jackson is the smallest image in his own video, the least imposing figure, so much so that Pareles missed him entirely. For the mirror is the television screen itself.

The video, directed by Don Wilson, is, as Pareles says, "a smoothly edited, slightly tricked-up montage of news footage." But it does not, as he also says, "demonstrate remarkable — I'd say monumental — gall, insensitivity and megalomania." Or is that finally racism speaking? The images are, in sequence, white police beating black South Africans in a riot, two successive images of starving brown children in Ethiopia, a swarming mass of mostly black people in a Civil Rights march. Up until now, all the images have been in color except the first image of South African violence, which was in black and white. The next image, which is important, combines, for the first time, color and black-and-white film. It features a solitary figure of a black boy dancing in what appears to be an urban riot. On either side of him there is fire. The fire is colorized.

Pareles also apparently missed this image, or considered it unimportant (probably because he's never been a little black boy, never expects to become one, and never will have to worry what may happen to one). Like Michael Jackson, the boy dances, and the dance intersects ambiguous emotions of joy and despair, recalling to me children caught up in political/religious violence from Soweto to the West Bank. Moreover, that this child dances alone amidst fire makes this frame crucial to the video's self-understanding. This frame is followed by a headshot of Bishop Tutu crying into clasped hands, two more shots of the homeless, then a headshot of Lech Walesa — the first facial shot of a white male — which dissolves into a shot of a Solidarity rally. This is followed by a shot of an unidentified black male yelling something in the context of what appears to be Civil Rights violence, a Ku Klux Klansman in full attire, then a side view of a bus in black and white, which has written on the side of it, "We Hate Race Mixing." Then the back of the bus is shown, with "Hate Bus" written in colorized red, then a black-and-white Hitler with a colorized armband, which Pareles describes as "red, like a soda-pop commercial."

Pareles is right enough in pointing out that, as we listen to and watch the video *Man in the Mirror*, we are snapping our fingers and tapping our feet to world hunger, violence, man's inhumanity to man and woman. But isn't that what we're doing anyway when we rock 'n' roll? Or when we engage in any cultural activity, which inevitably masks the seriousness and gloom of our global plight? Moreover, would it be considerd such monumental bad taste if *Man in the Mirror* were made by David Bowie or Mick Jagger or even Stevie Wonder? Pareles's flight from the letter of racism and the way it intersects with sexism (or, in this case, homophobia) allows the importance of a little black boy dancing his way to global multi-racial and androgynous interpretations to escape him.

Perhaps this is the time to emphasize that the critical refrain of the lyrics is couched in the past tense: "No message could have been any clearer" the

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words of the song say. Is this megalomania or history? After pointing the finger at racial bigotry and economic marginalization as epitomizing the administration of men (class distinctions become ethical and moral ones), *Man in the Mirror* focuses upon children (who dance) as the hope of the world. Perhaps the suggestion is somewhat lame in a first world in which black discourses are consigned to an awkward, unwanted, and self-reflexive postmodernism (which exists in autistic relationship to Western modernism). But this is new speech from a position once silent. That position speaks for a multi-racial, androgynous (non-patriarchal) future in which children no longer dance to the tune of class and/or religious (the same thing?) violence. The important thing to notice here is not the inevitable closure, but rather the very existence of the discourse in a first world in which blacks still fail to occupy positions of power in the media or academia, still fail to shape the interpretation of events, or the interpretation of interpretation. Is Jackson — or Don Wilson in Jackson's name — attempting a historical understanding of racial hatred? Who is this Don Wilson? Is he black? Is his mother black? Who is speaking here? And from where?

All functions abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. That's the ecstasy of communication. All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information.

Jean Baudrillard

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Despite Baudrillard's "ecstasy of communication," American television still keeps one unfathomable secret: this country's Afro-American presence. Almost everyone on television has blonde hair. But watching this year's Grammy Award ceremonies — which promised to emphasize Jackson's participation — you got an entirely different impression. Precisely because of the record industry's history of apartheid and the crucial role that Afro-American music has played in the genesis of all American forms of music, blackness is an ongoing crisis in the discourse of this annual program,. Here the order of spectacle (or 'entertainment') is substituted for the politics and/or history of heterogeneity.

The host was the white comedian Billy Crystal, an excellent choice (since he is known for his impression of Sammy Davis, Jr.). In his comedy monologue, he told us about his father's intensive involvement with (black) jazz greats. Then he launched into an impression of an old-time (black) jazz-musician, which sounded vaguely like Louis Armstrong. Thus, Crystal consolidated his mediational role in this drama of racial difference. This racial sketch inaugurated an endless stream of musical categories — Latin Pop, Latin Traditional, Traditional Gospel, Pop, R&B, Reggae, Rock, Contemporary Gospel, Country and Western, Folk, Classical, etc. — each featuring presenters carefully chosen for racial, sexual, age, and aesthetic balance. It seemed as though even the decisions about whether presentations of particular awards should be made on or off the air were weighed in terms of creating impressions of fairness and equality (but then this is probably the paranoia of invisibility speaking). Overall, dare I say that the process was tense in its misrepresentation of an egalitarian televisual practice? Like one would imagine a one-day special-session United Nations of Music, there were repeated standing ovations from the industry audience.

The location was Radio City Music Hall in New York City. The racially insensitive Mayor Koch occupied a prominent seat. Blacks did much of the entertaining for the Awards Ceremony, which is kind of interesing since blacks

actually received very few awards. Whitney Houston sang "I Just Wanna Dance With Somebody," backed up by a veritable rainbow coalition. George Benson sang "On Broadway." Cab Calloway sang "Minnie, the Moocher." Latin drummer Tito Puentes accompanied a black Celia Cruz, who sang in Spanish. The white performers — Lou Reed, who was backed up by one black and one white female; David Sanborn, who was accompanied by two black guitarists; and Billy Joel — all sounded black. Billy Joel's Ray Charles-like piano playing and singing "A New York State of Mind" was particularly striking in this regard. When Run DMC descended upon this spectacle from the audience — three slightly overweight black boys rapping, signifying, making a music of the unmusic of political marginality, and looking very much as though they knew they were assaulting the sensibilities of the Grammy audience — the exorcism of New York City racial tension seemed complete.

Then a very strange thing happened, which either threatened or confirmed the provisionality of the peace, the falseness of the synthesis. Jackie Mason, an elderly Jewish comedian, came out and did the only other comedy monologue in the show. It was supposed to have been an excerpt from his album, which was nominated in the comedy category, but some of its improvisatory elements revealed an 'entertaining' banter that came dangerously close to piercing the unknowing of the 'political unconscious' and revealing all. Mason began by lamenting his never having won any kind of award. Then he said he would take an award from anybody, even the Ku Klux Klan. He said this was a joke.

And perhaps Mason thought it was simply a joke (funny to whom?) and not racism, as if the two weren't binary oppositional faces of the same systemic dilemma. What do North Americans joke about, anyway? Hasn't the joke always been the outhouse of the racial+sexual, or what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject?"[7] In his comedy routine, Mason's shtick is that he plays a bigot — a Jewish version of an Archie Bunker — with a particular focus on Jewish/Gentile animosities. Ordinarily, in moments of ideological tension in cultural spaces (remember the early Telethons?), sex is the ice-breaker. But at the Grammies, already racially coded, Mason was almost irresistibly drawn to the off-color humor of race. Characteristically, he chose to focus on somebody in the audience.

That person, as the camera quickly revealed, was Quincy Jones, perhaps the most powerful black male in the music industry, the single figure who has most clearly transcended all the barriers and made good the promise of the Civil Rights Revolution. In recent years, he has not only produced and scored the movie *The Color Purple*, but he has also produced a succession of commercial hits for Michael Jackson. Perhaps Mason was trying to 'roast' the industry's most successful producer or perhaps he realy didn't recognize him, but he proceeded to heckle him in the following way:

Mister, are you a black person or just a Jew with a tan? It's not nice. I don't pick on black people. I have the highest respect of black people. You know the reason I have the highest respect for black people, Mister? Because the black people are finally making progress, the progress they deserve all these years in this country. And this is a show that proves it, this is where it's happening. This is where it's at. Thank God for them. I'm not like these fake Civil Rights crusaders, who tell you "Black People are as good as anybody else!" They sit in the back of their cars and when they see a black person walking towards the car they tell you to lock the door, "Lock the door! Lock the door! Click it! Click it! They're as good as anybody else. Are they coming back? Click it!

7 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

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Click it!" Why do you think black people dance so good? Wherever they go, they hear clicking and clicking.

Then Mason did a little dance to demonstrate Afro-American dance ability, derived, as he said, from their keeping pace with the incessant clicking of exclusion and social death. "I was in favor of black people when they started making fires twenty years ago," Mason went on to say. "They were 100 percent right for making fires because they never had true equality in America." Which made me think of the young boy dancing amidst fire in *Man in the Mirror*. But, as Mason felt compelled to remind us, "they only succeeded in burning their own house down." On the other hand, Mason continued, Jews set smaller fires, "and every fire shows a profit."

What was Mason doing? I don't know; televisual 'fact' melts before the eyes. I only know that Mason seemed somehow responsible for everything important that subsequently happened that night. First, Crystal parodied Jimmy the Greek's racial wisdom as Mason left the stage: "Jackie was bred to be a comic," Crystal said. "In the old days, they would get a comedy writer to breed with the funny man..." But the apparent inscription here of 'racism' as just another 'harmless' item on the menu of American comedy only continued the practice of mythologizing history and 'nature.'[8]

Much later, during the presentation of an award, Little Richard playfully declared himself the unacknowledged originator and architect of rock 'n' roll. Then during another awards presentation, Joe Williams sang "Everyday I have the Blues" to the accompaniment of Bobby McFerrin's basslike scat singing. These gestures seemed to be poised between old strategies of black postmodernism — in which the critique of racism is effaced by the autism of aesthetic demonstration — and old strategies of black modernism, which propose to reconstitute the critique as an aggressive dialectic.

On the other hand, Jackson's performance at the Grammies, which I count among the black responses to Mason's inscription of racism, seemed to announce a new black modernism in that it is critical of racism, even as it formally challenges conventional hierarchies of class, race, sexuality, and aesthetic mastery. Jackson began by lip-synching to a recording of *Man in the Mirror*, accompanied by black gospel star Andre Crouch and largely black female choir. But then Jackson didn't stop. The tape of the music ran out, the microphone was off, and Jackson was left singing soundlessly in one of those moments of televisual aporia that the medium/industry abhors. Then the microphone was switched on: Jackson's singing and the background singing was live now. He whooped, he jumped in the air, he shook his hands frenetically, and, showing most of the classical signs of "getting happy," as it is referred to in the black church, he fell on his knees. Crouch left his position on the stage and walked over to Jackson, evidently to help him to his feet, and then stopped. What did he see? That Jackson didn't need any help? That it was all an act? Or that it was a deliberate spectacle in which Jackson was now having his say, just as Mason had had his? Crouch danced away lightly. Jackson began to shout and exhort the people to "stand up," which this standing-ovation-loving audience seemed suddenly disinclined to do. But Jackson wouldn't stop until they stood up. The black female choir moved forward, clapped harder, sang louder. "White man's gotta make a change," Jackson cired almost inaudibly. "Black man's gotta make a change." Needless to say, Jackson won no Grammies this year.

8 Mason has since said in a *New York Times* interview that the lights prevented him from seeing who Quincy Jones was. His target was supposed to have been "anonymous."

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The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject *who places (himself),* separates *(himself), situates (himself), and therfore* strays *instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter — since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.*

Julia Kristeva

Have you ever wondered about Michael Jackson's education? Have you ever had a problem understanding the words he sings, or the words in black rock 'n' roll in general? My mother, who is a total fan of Jackson's, says he makes up words. But isn't that what black singers have always done? Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong simple made 'scatting' official. Henry Louis Gates calls this aspect of black culture "critical signification."[9] It is a process in which black culture 'signifies' on white culture through imitating and then reversing its formal strategies and preconditions, thus formulating a masked and surreptitious critique. The perfect example is the relationship of 'jazz' to white mainstream music. But what I'm beginning to wonder is: how 'critical' is it?

Bad, on the other hand, is deliberately and forthrightly critical of the world we live in. Very elaborate for a video, it attempts to address problems of class and race, and diminish or marginalize problems of sexuality and gender. First, the camera fixes on Jackson's face in a shot that reminds me of Dracula. I half expect him to reveal fangs, as in *Thriller*, but he doesn't. Filmed in black and white, the video continues by suturing together, in classic filmic mode, an alienated Jackson at a white, all-boys prep school called Duxton, somewhere within commuting distance of urban New York. His train ride home illustrates the unspeakable psychological distance he feels from his white classmates, who are playing with him one moment and literally dissolve the next. Then a subway ride — in which the camera pans a row of subway riders, mostly black and all female, except for one elderly white male — slowly eases him back into the ghetto.

When he gets home — a small, poorly furnished ghetto apartment — he is greeted by a note from his mother, which is read aloud by a female voice who tells him that she's at work and there is food in the refrigerator (there are no women in this video except the women we see briefly on the subway). The camera pans the walls, which are covered with photographs of adult black men (many recognizable R&B performers), perhaps one of whom is his father.

In short order, Jackson's character joins his black male friends in the street only to have elaborate communication problems, as though he hasn't seen them in a long time. They make fun of his speech. They also think he's making fun of their speech. That Jackson's character occupies a position outside the power of language to describe is thus established. Then his friends expect him to join them in their usual pastime, which appears to be robbing people. First, they try to rob a drug pusher, but the drug pusher has a gun. The image that conveys this information involves the only full shot of an adult black male character in the video as he pulls his coat back to reveal a gun which is stuck in his pants.

Then Jackson's character — identified only by the nicknames "Home Boy" and "Joe College" — and his black friends go into a subway station to rob people on their way home from work. Jackson's character dissents. There is a break in the action and Jackson, who had been dressed in a drab sweatshirt with a hood and a jacket, now reappears in color, fully made-up, hair

9 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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Dance scene from the music video *Bad*, 1988

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elaborately done and gleaming, and in a black outfit that features multiple metallic fixtures, which I think of as industrial nipples. He is joined by a collection of male dancers of various races — he is flanked by an Asian male and a white male. Together they dance a very athletic dance which attempts to substitute discernibly masculine gestures for the feminine gestures of an old-fashioned chorus line. Beside the refrain, which says "You know I'm bad, I'm bad, you know it, you know it," Jackson also sings, "The word is out. You're doing wrong. Gone lock you up before too long. Your lying lies don't make you right. So listen up, don't make a fight. Your talk is cheap. You're not a man. You're throwing stones out your hand." Once the dance concludes, his ghetto friends are quiet, yet impressed. They show mute indications of making peace with him. As they leave, the color images vanish and we pan to Jackson standing alone in a sweatshirt again.

First, the obvious: the video seems to be grappling with Jackson's problematic professional identity in relationship to a world of white, established wealth or cultural hegemony, and a world of black homelessness and poverty. In the process, it constructs a third racial view. Beside the white and the black, there's Jackson's new (fantasy) race, exemplified by his dancing and singing "I'm bad" with a team of multi-racial male dancers. Meanwhile, the video revels in the full splendor of his plastic surgery, his processed hair, his skin peelings to lighten his complexion, all of which can be seen as Jackson's attempts to alter his racial characterisics towards this "third race."

Less obvious: the video also struggles with Jackson's problematic personal identity in relationship to a world that insists upon distinct and meaningful

sexual difference. The absence of women in this video signals that the inscription of sexual difference will occur among men. But it also means that Jackson's subjectivity is doubly split in a perfect illustration of Jackson's proposal in *Man in the Mirror*. The first split is: "Home Boy" (black), who goes to private school (white) in order to learn to speak, vs. the rich black boy (Jackson), whose roots are in a black oral tradition, which doesn't speak, but who performs in the context of a white postmodern culture, which speaks only to deny his history. The second split is: Home Boy's fantasy of a utopian revolutionary consciousness (boys dancing) that would transcend the real (material) conflict between himself and his friends vs. the real Jackson in an actual performance. It is appropriate to speak of such doublings precisely because videos are hybrids of music performance documentaries and television ads, and also because Jackson probably has more control over his own videos than he knows what to do with. Not only is the *Bad* video selling the consumer the album, it is also selling the commodified Jackson to the generic Jackson (black males collectively) as a utopian vision which challenges the diverse appropriations of black and white postmodernisms.

In *Rocking Around the Clock*, E. Ann Kaplan identifies five basic categories of videos: romantic, socially conscious, nihilist, classical, and postmodern. *Bad* shows indications of all these categories (that Martin Scorsese was its director suggests this video's complexity.) But it also seems to cross two kinds in particular: the socially conscious and the classical. The "socially conscious" video, Kaplan says, is characterized thematically by a love interest which is problematic with sex as a struggle for autonomy, by parents and public figures as forms of authority, and by the presence of a cultural critique. The "classical" video is characterized thematically by love in the form of the male gaze with sex as voyeuristic and fetishistic.

Both parents and public figures were present as vicarious authority in the scene that shows "Home Boy" in his apartment — these are his mother's voice and the photos of the black male R&B stars. Of course, the visualization of ghetto conditions shapes the cultural critique, and presumably the fact that he stops his ghetto friends from robbing a Puerto Rican male signals redeeming socialization. The fantasy dance in the subway I see as an articulation of a problematic love interest and sex as a struggle for autonomy. It is clearly defiant, ostentatiously unrequited, and obviously a struggle for aesthetic, professional, sexual, and racial independence, or autonomy, in the most profound sense. At the same time, "love in the form of the male gaze" is present in the illicit voyeurism of the camera when it surveys Jackson in his performance outfit or as we watch Home Boy's friends watching the sexually ambiguous Jackson and his team of multi-racial boy dancers in full color. Moreover, "male as subject, female as object," which Kaplan identifies as the form of authority in a "classical" video, undeniably points the finger at Jackson, in the fictional performer mode of the video, as the female (white?) locked inside the subjectivity of Home Boy (black male), who is locked inside the subjectivity of the real Jackson (androgynous and multi-racial), the producer of this and all his texts.

Sexual difference, racial difference, and class difference, especially in tandem, are not subjects which the televisual medium can deal with forthrightly (who can?). Nevertheless, *Bad*, in an anachronistic and dialogical attempt at concealment, reveals the grounds for a new interpretative space, and the possibility of a new "modernist language of subversion and negation," which subverts postmodernism from inside its last secret.

Third Text 1989.3:11-22.

In conclusion, I would like to historicize my interest in Jackson. My mother, Faith Ringgold, was asked to donate a work of art to a benefit auction for Bishop Desmond Tutu being sponsored by Jackson. As her contribution to the benefit, Faith chose to do a mural/quilt presentation of *Bad* with Jackson in the foreground. Still living in Harlem, in an apartment fourteen flights directly above the subway station where *Bad* was filmed, Faith is convinced that Jackson has made a worthwhile critique of the values of black boys in the streets. In her video, which documents the making of her "Bad" quilt, we have a provocative intersection of the power of performance and the performance of interpretation.

On the one hand, the image shows the 'Bad' dancers led by Jackson no longer in the subway station but upstairs in the streets of the ghetto dancing. On the other hand, these could be generic black male youths engaged in frantic physical activity of unclear intent. They could be fighting, or are they throwing off the mantle of drug addiction, under-education, and repression, shirking the rage that blocks their progress in school, and multiplies the precarious homes of their numerous offspring, exorcising the inarticulate and unspeakable that paves their way to the prisons? Or are they dancing at the end of racism's strings?

In her video, Faith talks about badness as part of that "struggle for space" that Jameson considers essential to the reconceptualization of cultural politics. She describes her images by saying,

> I could use these so-called bad guys and play them against Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Zora Neale Hurston, people like Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Rosa Parks (whose names are written in the borders of the quilt), and Michael Jackson himself, because these are the people who are really bad in that they are able to defy very destructive forces in order to help not only themselves but other people. That is what is *really* bad.

Perhaps in a related gesture, Martin Scorsese, the director of the *Bad* video, includes himself, briefly (almost an invisible mega-second), in frontal and side photos on a "Wanted for Sacrilege" poster also marked "Bad" in bold letters.

For me, the key thing is that the perception of Jackson (and of every other aspect of black culture) is shaped by a world process of information gathering, dissemination, and interpretation (spanning mass media and academia) which notoriously marginalizes the significance of people of color. Jackson appears to be groping for an individual solution to a global problem as he attempts to generate somewhat primitive or naive historical readings from a position (that of black male pop star/black male in the street/black male of ambiguous sexuality) in cultural discourse ordinarily experienced by mainstream (white) culture as profoundly silent, nonexistent, and unspoken for. That he should have the energy to engage in such a process — despite the Pepsi commercials, despite the sexual anxieties he seems to arouse in a fairly large proportion of the heterosexual male audience over thirteen — strikes me as good, which is to say bad.

Third Text 1989.3:11-22.